

## THE POISON DIARY OF 1995 - Part 3

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Article

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The last two months of 1995 were not spared its share of major poisoning incidents. The year came to a close with a dramatic reminder that poisons constitute a real and immediate threat to us all.

### November

The cabinet approved new terms to allow a private company a 15-year concession to run the country's first toxic waste management plant costing RM 375 million. Industries accumulated about 125,000 tonnes of toxic waste between 1987-1994, all waiting to be disposed at the new plant. Meanwhile, the Johor State Economic Development Corporation, in a joint venture with two Japanese firms, will build a plant to treat toxic industrial waste.

In Kemaman, 300-odd drums of lubricating oil were dumped near a housing estate. The dumping took place because the company lacked storage place. Under the Environmental Quality (Scheduled Waste) Regulations 1989, the onus is on the waste generator to notify the DOE every three months on the amount of waste generated and how the materials were stored or treated.

In Osaka, the Japanese combed parks and graveyards in search of a tiny (4cm to 10cm) poisonous spider allegedly brought in from Australia. The insect, black in colour with red stripes on its back, had started to breed in the port city. The spider's venom is capable of killing infants and the elderly.

In the Pacific, the use of cyanide by divers who squirt it to stun fish has become widespread, although it is generally illegal to use poison in fishing. The amount used is reported to be able to destroy the reef ecosystem and kill sensitive corals and habitats. Such a practice can introduce unnecessary poisons into nature's foodchain.

France exploded its fourth nuclear bomb in the Pacific despite protests from all over the world. Earlier, there was an anonymous poisoning threat against French wine in Finland as protest over the resumption of the nuclear tests. Britain went public in its support for the tests.

### December

In the midst of controversy over nuclear arms testings, the 5th ASEAN Summit witnessed the historic signing of the South East Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (SEANWFZ) treaty on Dec 14-15 in Bangkok. The treaty calls for the protection of the region from "environmental pollution and the hazards posed by radioactive wastes or other radioactive materials". It also prohibits "the dumping or any deliberate disposal at sea, including seabed and subsoil insertion, of radioactive wastes or other matter from vessels, aircraft, platforms or other man-made structures at sea". All the seven heads of the governments of ASEAN and those of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar signed the treaty.

The Ministry of Health ordered a nationwide check for lead-containing salt after the discovery of high lead contents in one commercial brand of salt. It contained more than 4.5 mg of lead per kg of salt. Its sale was banned with immediate effect.

The National Poison Centre signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the Sabah Foundation to conduct a study on lead poisoning in pre-school children in the state. This is a landmark study in Malaysia which will seek to gather in-depth information on the situation of lead poisoning among students in the country.

In Beijing, some 13 students in a suburban school died after being overcome by toxic fumes as they slept in their dormitory. The fumes were caused by coal-dust bricks with a high sulphur content. The bricks are the main source of heating in China during winter months. If burned in confined spaces without adequate ventilation, the fumes emitted can be extremely dangerous. Hundreds of Chinese die every year after being poisoned by such fumes while sleeping.

Another sulphur-related incident occurred near Cape Town in South Africa. It happened after a blaze broke out in an explosive and chemical plant, sending clouds of poisonous gas to the nearby town of Macassar. At least three people died, suspected of inhaling the gas, and about 100 were injured. About 2,500 people were evacuated as the toxic fumes engulfed the town. The gas caused their eyes to sting and victims suffered sensations of tightness in their chests and difficulty in breathing. The incident started when stocks of sulphur used to make paint, plastic and vinyl caught fire, allegedly due to ineffective precautionary measures.

On the lighter side, a woman diagnosed as suffering from a rare condition known as pica, was reported in the United States to have been poisoned because of her condition. Pica is a condition where a person craves non-food items. In this case, the woman chewed and swallowed socks, causing her to experience a "toxic sock"

syndrome. She was admitted to a hospital emergency room after complaining of nausea, vomiting and dull back pain for three weeks. A large bezoar (a hard ball of material) was discovered in her stomach. Doctors have reported cases of people eating non-food items like dirt, hair, chalk and clay, but this is the first time socks were involved. Why pica develops is not exactly known.

In southern China, a mother and son admitted to a mass poisoning of villagers in Jinli, and were sentenced to death. During the poisoning incident, which lasted from May until November, eighteen people died and 160 others required hospital treatment. The pair sprinkled rat poison on food in restaurants and private kitchens, on rice in shops, on fish ponds and vegetable fields around the village. The incident triggered a mass exodus to the nearby towns.

After 40 years of sufferings, more than five thousand victims of Minamata disease was given a final compensation totalling about RM 750 million. The disease arose from an industrial poisoning incident that polluted Minamata Bay in the 1950s. It is Japan's worst industrial accident in which more than 1,000 people were killed and thousands more terribly crippled due to eating mercury contaminated seafood. The case took at least three decades of legal proceedings for the final settlement.

Barely two weeks after the signing of SEANWFZ, France staged the fifth of its controversial nuclear weapons tests in the South Pacific. The blast is reported to be at least double the atomic strength of the one dropped in Hiroshima in 1945. Paris was accused of "totally disregarding" a United Nations resolution calling for an immediate end to nuclear testing. This latest test is the worst possible message for the New Year to the people of the world. France is expected to conduct another test in February this year.

The nuclear device detonated by France in the South Pacific at 5.30 am Malaysian time in the last few days of 1995 despite worldwide condemnation reminds us that all is not well and that 1996 may be another year that requires greater vigilance.

As mentioned repeatedly in this column, not only can poisonings occur in a number of ways, but more importantly, most are preventable if only we take precautionary measure. Although most of the cases reviewed above involve large groups of people, there are many other isolated cases that have not garnered much public attention. All the same, such isolated cases have also brought much unnecessary suffering.

It is important to recount some of the events last year, lest we forget and repeat the same mistakes again. Probably the most relevant one occurred in 1986, when a nuclear reactor in Chernobyl in the former Soviet Union leaked radioactive materials and poisoned thousands.

A decade before the Chernobyl incident, a toxic herbicide, dioxin, was accidentally released in the town of Seveso in Italy. In 1956, the Minamata Bay incident occurred. In the same year, thalidomide, a sedative and antiemetic claimed by its manufacturer to be safe, caused thousands of babies to be born with limb deformities. These babies were subsequently called "flipper babies".

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